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ABSTRACT

Composition teachers can learn much from the tradition of psychologist and researcher Carl R. Rogers. Placing the direction of the therapeutic process in the hands of the client, Rogers's work focuses on "potentiality," the idea that humans are primed with a potential for self-realization and are endowed with an actualizing tendency to grow and create. Rogers argues that in any interpersonal relationship, individuals have within themselves the capacity to understand and to reorganize, and it is up to a facilitator to create a climate distinguished by acceptance, understanding, and empathy. In adopting these Rogerian ideas, writing teachers must strive to help students develop initiative and responsibility for their own writing and to have them emerge from the classroom with increasing autonomy and distinctness. Writing teachers must both believe that students are fundamentally capable of managing their own lives as writers and help each individual in the class to clarify his or her own purposes. As resource persons, teachers need to introduce students to the possibilities available to them as writers: heuristic strategies, methods of revising, stylistic options, and suggestive models. They can replace the lecture method with workshop methods. Their written comments on student papers should reflect an attitude of acceptance and interpretation rather than one of judgment. Above all, pedagogy incorporating Rogerian principles aims to help people become more autonomous, more spontaneous, and more confident users of language. (HTH)

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Freedom Through Language:

Applications of the Ideas of Carl Rogers

to the Teaching of Composition

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Eclectic folk that we are, composition teachers borrow profitably from many disciplines. Given our special involvement with individuals and their journeys of personal discovery through language, we can especially learn from the existential-phenomenological tradition of counseling psychology, the most influential exponent of which has been Carl R. Rogers. A counseling psychologist and researcher, Rogers is best known for developing what has become known as non-directive or client-centered therapeutic methods. Rogers had been writing professionally for over five decades and continues to be productive at the age of 82. The books which most heavily inform this paper span the period from Client-Centered Therapy, which appeared in 1951, to Freedom to Learn for the '80's, which appeared just last year as an updated version of the text originally published in 1969. In this period appeared such landmark publications as Psychotherapy and Personality Change (1954), On Becoming a Person (1961), Person to Person (1967), On Personal Power (1977) and A Way of Being (1980).[1]

Non-directive counseling is perhaps a misleading term, for it is not so much "non-directive" as it is self-directive. As a therapeutic method which has been recognized as a major contribution to counseling methodology, it has as its primum mobile the tenent that the direction of the therapeutic process should be placed in the hands of the client, rather than the counselor. Under the guidance of an empathic and supportive counselor, the client assumes responsibility, in the Rogerian scheme of things, for assessing and giving form to his or her own life. A basic theme of Rogers's work is that of potentiality--that human beings are primed with a potential for self-realization and that they are endowed,

genetically, with an actualizing tendency to grow and to create.[2] Rogers's image of the person is that the individual is worthy of trust, and that to be fully free--"fully functioning"--means to be able to be trusted to act consciously and autonomously, to be able to make choices. For those of us who do what you and I, as writing teachers, do for a living, such freedom manifests itself most importantly through language choices.

Rogers argues that the leap from the therapeutic situation to the pedagogical one is not terribly huge. For Rogerians, teachers--as professional helpers--are counselors too; our special "clients," as it were, might be construed as our students' linguistic faculties. Writing of this modulation from therapy to education in Client-Centered Therapy (p. 384), Rogers says:

> If, in therapy it is possible to rely upon the capacity of the client to deal constructively with his life situation and if the therapist's aim is best directed toward releasing that capacity, then why not apply this hypothesis and this method in teaching? If the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding, and respect is the most effective basis for facilitating the learning which is called therapy, then might it not be the basis for the learning which is called education? If the outcome of this approach to therapy is a person who is not only better informed in regard to himself, but who is better able to guide himself in new situations, might a similar outcome be hoped for in education? It

is questions of this sort which plague the counselor who is also a teacher.

Any interpersonal relationship, Rogers argues, is characterized by two principles that govern it. First, that the individual has within himself or herself the capacity to understand and to reorganize, and second, that it is up to a facilitator to create a climate distinguished by acceptance, understanding, and empathy. Every effective writing teacher, of course, has his or her own style of facilitating the learning of writing, so I can hardly offer universally applicable recommendations. I would like to suggest, though, some common ways in which writing teachers can invite a composition class to become a community of writers, fulfilling both individual and collective goals, using writing to deepen understandings of our lives and the world around us.

As writing teachers adopting Rogerian ideas, we must strive to have students develop initiative and responsibility for their own writing and to have them emerge from our classrooms with increasing autonomy and distinctness. The genuine learning of writing, as every writing teacher well knows, is something that must take place within the individual. We cannot force it to happen, but we can facilitate it, once we begin to grasp what the elements of such genuine learning are. Rogers has described it as possessing five traits (Freedom to Learn, p. 5): first, that it has the quality of personal involvement--the whole person, both cognitively and affectively, is involved; second, that it is self-initiated--even when the impetus comes from the outside (as indeed it does for the majority of our students for whom our course is required), there is a sense of discovery,

or exploring, grasping, and comprehending that comes from within; third, that it is pervasive--it makes a difference in the behavior, attitudes, perhaps even the personality of the learner; fourth, that it is evaluated by the learner--he or she decides success; and fifth, that its essence is meaning--the element of meaning-making is built into the entire process.

How can we encourage this kind of learning to occur? First, and most obviously, we must make our writing assignments have a relevance to our students, for engagement is a necessary condition for this kind of significant learning to take place. All of the research in the area of writing apprehension has certainly indicated that students do not write well out of alienation or fear. One of the ways we can accomplish this goal, and to aim toward a participatory mode of decision-making, to build trust and to nourish the natural desire to learn, is to have our students design their own assignments. Students need to be given the opportunity to determine their own writing topics. Not only does this help to democratize the classroom, but it gives them practice, for every writing occasion, in determining their own papers' scopes, purposes, audiences and the rhetorical strategies that are appropriate for meeting their own objectives. This kind of practice at the very beginning of the writing process strikes me as absolutely essential if our students are to mature as writers fully able to make their own decisions. If they are to learn to use language freely, what better place to start than the selection of their writing topics?

Allowing such freedom may be too risky for some of our students. Modify this, then, to specify some element of the paper--perhaps its particular aim, or a particular kind of audience, or a particular persona

you wish for them to create. But don't do it all for them--that deprives them of a responsibility that is rightfully theirs, a responsibility some of them may be claiming for the first time ever. As Rogerians we must help our students to make choices and to live with the consequences of their choices, both the mistaken ones as well as the sound ones.

When students do invent their own assignments, they do become personally involved with their composing processes, both affectively and cognitively as whole persons. And even though the impetus to write comes from without, by investing themselves in the earliest stages of composing, students can draw on inner resources to explore from within. As Rogers points out (Client-Centered Therapy, p. 389), "A person learns significantly only those things which he perceives as being involved in the maintenance of, or enhancement of, the structure of the self." Written papers cease, under these circumstances, to be perfunctory scrawlings submitted only for the instructor's scrutiny but become expressive communications to be shared with many readers.

That's when they have invented well. Sometimes they won't, and they will fail in their writing. We must permit that too, as Rogerians. You and I have learned from our failures; we must be confident enough, generous enough, to allow our students such learning too. Since, for Rogers, risk-taking is the sine qua non of the person who is free, we must free up as many opportunities as possible for our students to take risks, even if it means they "fail" now and then.

I have found in my own experience, more often than not, that given the chance to construct their own assignments, students will rise to the level of their ability and readiness. Part of our job as instructor is to be

sure to help them to do that, so they don't become complacent or ossified in set modes or strategies. We need to help them to know, as you and I already know, that the joys of writing emerge from confronting its many challenges. This kind of activity, by the way, is extremely cognitively demanding--research in learning theory, for instance, seems to indicate that problem-finding is a more sophisticated cognitive process than problem-solving.[3]

What, then, in the Rogerian framework, is the role of the instructor? The teacher, like the counselor, can only be as non-directive as he or she has achieved respect for others, and Rogers talks extensively about the importance of prizing the individual, of addressing him or her with unconditional positive regard (Freedom to Learn, pp. 103-127). We must believe that the student is fundamentally capable of managing his or her own life as a writer and help each individual in the class to clarify his or her own purposes. Even though all major decisions are made by the students, our role is far from a passive one. Modeling ourselves after the Rogerian counselor, we must seek to be acceptant, understanding, and empathic, responding to and validating students and their writing (A Way of Being, pp. 113-118). We must act, chiefly, as resource persons who help to make the learning of writing a pervasive activity.

As resource persons, we can do many things. We need to introduce our students to the plenitude of possibilities available to them as writers--heuristic strategies, modes of development, methods of revising, stylistic options, and to examine with them, perhaps, examples of others' writing which they can study as suggestive models. The important thing, I think, is that we need to make available the widest possible range of sources, so

they may be free to experiment by trying out many different things.

We really don't have to supply a motivation, per se, if we follow Rogers; rather, we need to tap into the forces that are already motivating our students, to help clarify the purposes of the individuals in the class as well as the more general purposes of the group, relying on the desires of each student to implement those purposes which have personal, significant meaning for him or her. Rather than pre-establishing a set course of study, we must ascertain, early on, who our students are and what they want to learn. I have found that one of the most fruitful diagnostic essay topics that I can give at the beginning of the semester (and early on, I do provide writing topics) is to ask students to write about "What I Want to Learn in this Class." This topic is followed up by an open letter to other members of the class, detailing what each student wants to learn, specifically, and how others can be of help.

What we can pre-establish, as resource persons, is power-sharing in the writing classroom. To follow Rogers means to abandon the lecture method as one's primary teaching mode, with its assumption that students are empty vessels needing to be filled with atomistic pieces of information. We need to replace that approach with a workshop method, one that requires students to be active doers of writing bringing what they know and sharing it. Collaborative learning activities--group writing or peer-review of classmates' drafts, for instance--help lead us in the direction of students' assuming the responsibility--and the freedom--for their own writing. So does the multiple draft technique of teaching writing that requires students to prepare several developing versions of the same paper, versions that they and their classmates critique.

One of the outcomes of power-sharing in the writing classroom is that we, as instructors, become participant learners. Modeling enters into the Rogerian therapeutic process a bit, and as teachers, we might model our own writing behavior. To take Rogers to heart, at best, we might compose assignments along with our students, bringing in multiple drafts and all; at very least, we can write on the board when they write in their notebooks, freewrite when they freewrite, and keep journals while they keep journals. It is important to show, I think, that we share their struggles with writing, and yet even so, it is something that we do without being forced to!

As resource persons we can also hold individual conferences with our students in which we discuss their written work, and their thoughts and feelings about writing. Conferencing guarantees that we deal one-on-one with each person's concerns. The basic thrust of a Rogerian approach, as you have seen, is essentially to individualize instruction. Like personality growth, growth in writing is a highly individualistic process, and Rogerian-minded teachers allow for differences in individuals in how and when they need to learn things. Writing conferences constitute one productive way of accommodating such differences.

One final important area where Rogers might come to our aid as writing teachers is in the area of our written comments to our students about their writing. Rogers speaks repeatedly about the importance of <u>accepting</u> and <u>interpreting</u> rather than judging, and in no situation is it more important to establish a climate of trust than in responding to students' writing. Our research at this stage is a mixed bag when it comes to determining the benefits of marginal-versus-terminal comments, so I would like merely to

summarize the three kinds of responses that we may borrow from Rogerian counselors in therapeutic relationships, as they have been explained elsewhere.[4]

The first is that we may paraphrase students' thoughts--resonating and rephrasing what a student has written is an effective kind of positive reinforcement to help a student confirm that (s)he has been understood. Such confirmation helps to keep the channels of communication open. The second is that we may share thoughts and experiences of our own that are similar to what the student has written, helping to bridge connections between the student and ourselves and showing, in another way, that we have understood the student. The third is that we may ask for more information, requesting that the student elaborate, explain, exemplify, clarify, or whatever. This kind of response also keeps the channels of communication open and cues the student that what appears on paper may not fulfill his or her original intentions. It is safe to say, from a Rogerian perspective, that in our comments less is probably more, and that it is nearly always preferable to invite revision by posing a question than decreeing a command. Recall, after all, that Rogerian practices are predicated upon the person's capacity to understand, reorganize, and adapt.

The application of Rogers in the area of evaluation is a tricky thing, I think. I don't know about your students, but my undergraduates want grades, and they insist on my grading their work. I have decided, therefore, that one of my responsibilities as resource person is assigning letter grades, though part of me feels that this is something of violation of the tenor of significant learning--that it be evaluated by the learner. My compromise solution at this point is to insist that students also

complete their own evaluations, to complement mine. When they hand in a finished paper, it is accompanied by a self-critique, where they evaluate how well they feel they have done what they set out to do; judge what they like best about their paper and what they like least and would work on more, if they had the time; and relate what surprised them as they wrote this paper. That final consideration--the surprise--clues me (and them) to what was probably the most significant learning that resulted from a particular composing process. This self-critique influences the paper's grade, actually, and writing it is a worthwhile synthetic activity for students, for it gives them a needed opportunity to distance themselves from their writing. Students actually enjoy the self-critique, too, for it provides a satisfying sense of closure for each assignment, laying a foundation for the next.

What are the overall goals of a writing pedagogy that incorporates Rogerian principles? More than anything else, such a pedagogy aims to help people to become more autonomous, more spontaneous, and more confident users of the written language.[5] It seeks to encourage the emergence of students as individuals who are capable of responsible, self-initiated action and who adapt flexibly and creatively in many writing contexts. Its foremost desideratum, I would say, is that each student attain his or her own self-created, free voice, one whose distinctness can be made manifest in the written word.

One of our government's recent publications, A Nation At Risk, warns that we are faced by "a rising tide of mediocrity."[6] I am very much threatened by this, for I fear such mediocrity--voiceless people--imperils the freedom of everybody. My solution is to try to empower students with

voices and choices. I believe that this is the most important work that we can do as writing teachers in 1984, and in doing it we can be immeasurably enriched by adapting the ideas of one of this century's most original and humanitarian thinkers, Carl Rogers.

Notes

[1]Carl R. Rogers, Client-Centered Therapy (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1951); Carl R. Rogers and Rosalind F. Dymond, ed., Psychotherapy and Personality Change (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); Carl R. Rogers, On Becoming a Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961); Carl R. Rogers, et al., Person to Person (Lafayette, California: Real People Press, 1967); Carl R. Rogers, Freedom to Learn (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1969); Carl R. Rogers, Carl Rogers on Personal Power (New York: Delacorte, 1977); Carl R. Rogers, A Way of Being (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980); Carl R. Rogers, Freedom to Learn for the '80's (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1983).

[2]Willard B. Frick, Humanistic Psychology: Interviews with Maslow, Murphy, and Rogers (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1971), p. 121.

[3]Robert J. Yinger, "Can We Really Teach Them to Think?," in Fostering Critical Thinking, ed. Robert E. Young (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980), pp. 11-31.

[4]Mary H. Beaven, "Individualized Goal Setting, Self-Evaluation, and Peer Evaluation," in Evaluating Writing, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), pp. 135-156.

[5]Maxine Hairston, "Using Carl Rogers' Communication Theories in the Composition Classroom," Rhetoric Review, 1, No. 1 (1982), pp. 50-55.

[6]The National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation At Risk (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).